

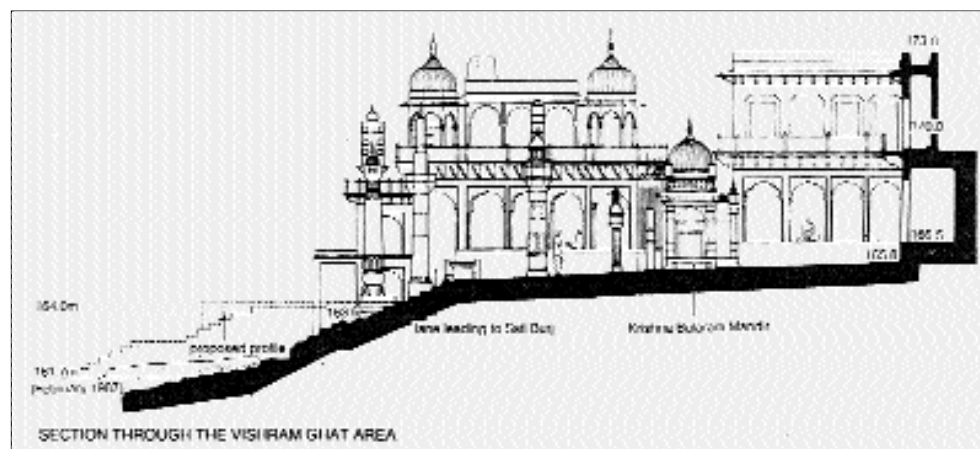
Selina Chaubey

Conservation Initiatives in India

A New Delhi NGO Works to Protect an Endangered Legacy

Vishram Ghat, Mathura. Arched pavilion in the "contemplative zone." Photo by K. T. Ravindran.

Vishram Ghat area. Several structures would have been submerged if the state government had not agreed to lower the water level.



A mention of India's heritage conjures up diverse images. One thinks of ornate 14th-century temples, palaces of marble and stone, stairscapes along riverfronts in holy cities, and winding alleyways in forgotten towns alive with history. India is a repository of so vast an architectural heritage that preserving it poses an enormous challenge. And yet, as Lord Curzon, Governor General of India from 1899-1905, wrote on the need to conserve this heritage: "I cannot conceive any obligation more strictly appertaining to a Supreme Government than the conservation of the most beautiful and perfect collection of monuments in the world."

Today, the Government of India tries through its various agencies to conserve much of this irreplaceable cultural resource. But given the enormity of the task, and the fact that in a developing country priority must be given to modernization, much of the country's heritage is often neglected. Against this background, it is easy to understand the role

when any part of it is threatened.

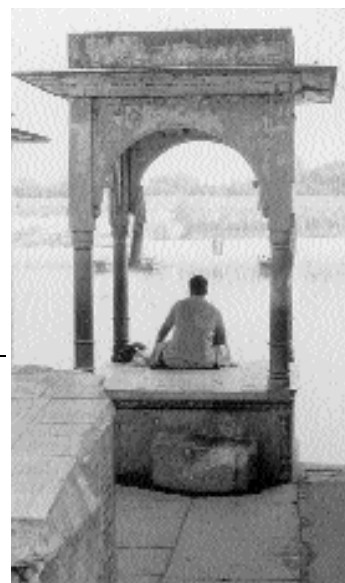
INTACH's field organs are about 200 chapters set up throughout the country. They highlight issues, mobilize public opinion, and manage campaigns. INTACH also provides professional consultancy to state governments and other institutions for designing complex heritage restoration projects. In the field of architecture, these projects range from promoting the re-use of historic buildings to managing large heritage conservation areas that include entire historic townships.

One of the boldest initiatives made by INTACH in the field of conservation of the built environment was the attempt to identify and establish heritage zones. These zones are defined as areas of special architectural, cultural, or historic interest. But the concept of heritage zones goes beyond mere preservation of monuments. The emphasis is shifted from the fabric of historic cities to the people who determine the character of these cities. INTACH's intervention aims not only at conserving the built structures while improving the environment in these heritage zones, but also, where possible, at conserving lifestyles and existing traditions.

The medieval handloom weaving town of Chanderi in Madhya Pradesh is an example of a heritage zone that aims at

of a voluntary organization like The Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage. The Trust, better known by its acronym INTACH, was set up as an autonomous non-government organization in New Delhi in 1984 to promote the cause of heritage conservation in India. It promotes awareness about India's natural and cultural heritage and acts as a pressure group for preservation

revitalizing existing traditions. INTACH's work in this town, on the one hand, aims at restoring and re-using historic buildings. On the other, it attempts to improve the lives of weavers while retaining their traditional occupation. New housing has been designed to serve today's purpose and still be harmonious with the past. The scheme takes into account the special needs of weavers in



terms of loom size and living space traditions while designing houses.

Two other projects initiated by INTACH that have been integrated in the urban development plans of local governments are outlined below.

The Ghats of Mathura

An interesting example of a heritage conservation project proposed to be carried out by



Central court of Vishram Ghat seen from the river (above); 1920s photo. Recent photo (below) shows the same area encroached upon by unchecked building activity. Notice the bricked-up arches. Photo by K.T. Ravindran.

INTACH is the *ghat* restoration project of Mathura, a small town on the banks of the river Yamuna near New Delhi. The steps that lead down to the river are known as the *ghats*. In Mathura, the *ghats* include a two-kilometer long stairscape along the river, built more than four centuries ago, and an array of beautiful pavilions, shrines, and latticework edifices. As in many other holy river cities of India, the *ghats* of this town play an important role in the lives of people. Situated on the interface where land and water meet, they are regarded as an auspicious venue for the performance of religious and social ceremonies. For centuries, thousands of pilgrims have assembled on these steps to bathe in the holy river

Yamuna on religious occasions and to offer prayers. The people of the town perform rituals on the steps, ascetics contemplate in tranquil pavilions, and social groups use the platforms for evening meetings.

Mathura, a holy city steeped in legend, holds a special sanctity for many people in India. Lord Krishna is said to have been born here, and even today various stretches of *ghats* are associated with specific events in the life of Krishna. Some of the aura of this town is palpable to anyone witnessing the ritual of the evening prayer on the *ghats*. As dusk deepens and a pink glow spreads across the evening sky, a myriad temple bells begin to ring. Their sound carries across the waves to the distant shore. A scent of incense fills the air outside the marble shrines and the silhouettes of delicately carved arches are framed against the light of the fading day. Gradually, the steps leading down to the river come alive as priests intone *mantras*, devotees gather to pray, and clanging bells herald the evening's worship to the river.

The rituals on the *ghats* re-emphasize the link that has long existed between the people of the town and the sacred river. However, constant use and neglect are destroying the exquisite edifices and eroding the 400-year-old land-water interface. Huge cracks are pulling the steps asunder at many places, several of the hexagonal platforms are showing a dangerous tilt towards the river, and the flowing water has caused a shift in the foundation piles. INTACH is campaigning for the restoration of the Mathura *ghats* not only to preserve its unique land-water interface design, but also to keep alive an age-old ritual tradition.

The Mathura *ghat* restoration project was initiated a few years ago when the state government of Uttar Pradesh proposed to build a barrage downstream from Mathura. It was feared that the raised water level may submerge the *ghats*. A systematic study undertaken by INTACH resulted in the formulation of a holistic restoration plan for Mathura. The Trust's team of architects, sociologists, and urban planners found that several stretches of the *ghats* were being severally misused. Stone-works were found to be damaged and vandalized, while some open pavilions were bricked up and misused as rooms and cattle sheds.

Detailed proposals were prepared for each of the three areas into which the hub of the Mathura *ghats*, the holy *Vishram Ghat*, was divided: the civic zone, a public plaza for people plying the river; the ritual zone with the main Krishna shrine and a succession of arches; and the contemplative zone, a tranquil area marked by pavilions and changing rooms. These proposals aim at restoring



the structures while enhancing the specific characteristics of the three zones. An augmentation of the stairscape is envisaged to match the raised level of water, the much used central court is to be covered with a new surface in consonance with the original design, and the rooms on the upper floors are to be cleared of incongruous masonry so that the bricked up pavilions may be transparent again as they once used to be.

For the convenience of pilgrims, it is proposed to improve the routes of circumambulation and to augment urban furniture. This includes improving balcony rails and seats around the base of large old trees. Project architect K.T. Ravindran feels that the project is challenging because it involves adding to history. "It is not often that one gets an opportunity to make permanent additions to a 500-year-old fabric," he says.

INTACH's interaction with user groups also revealed that a certain community of boatmen were traditionally not allowed access to the main ghat area. They were forced to unload their goods in an unclean area near the *Kanshkar ghats*. Project proposals include building a proper platform at the same location for the convenience of the boatmen. "The project has garnered a lot of local support," says Amita Baig, Director, Projects, INTACH. "This is encouraging, because one of the hallmarks of a successful project is popular participation."

The proposals were accepted by the state government and incorporated in the development plan of the town. "INTACH's biggest achievement," says Ravindran, "was saving the ghat from going underwater. We insisted, and the state government finally agreed to lower the level of the barrage by one meter, from the planned 166 meters."

The Port Town of Cochin

A different kind of historic town to which INTACH has addressed itself in recent years is the ancient port town of Cochin. "The town fascinated us," said archeologist B.K. Thapar, INTACH's for-

mer Secretary, "because it was a halting point on the ancient spice route and still retains the impact of three sea-faring nations: the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the English of the 16th century. The local government has accepted many of our proposals to retain the multi-facial character of this town. Some of these have already been implemented."

Architect Ravindran calls the town a "veritable museum of architectural history." Various European building styles co-exist with distinct kinds of indigenous styles. Gujarati and Tamil



building styles are seen side-by-side with various shades of Christian and Jewish architecture.

The INTACH team was on site for over a year, interacting with citizens and drawing up recommendations for the re-use of historic buildings. Special by-laws were formulated for the historic zone. Mindless road-widening schemes were brought to a standstill with the help of a protest march organized by the local chapter.

A major proposal involves establishing a history park that would include a walk through various heritage magnets of the area. The walk will connect the beach with museums and cemeteries. A cemetery in the Dutch colony will be restored, and the very distinct Jewish settlement has already been made into a pedestrian zone.

Stringent regulations for water-front development have been formulated and several houses upgraded as a result of INTACH's intervention. "With projects like Cochin going full steam, we can hope to create an example of how heritage zones can be successfully integrated with city development plans. It also shows that the conservation movement is alive and well in India," says Baig.

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Houses along Cochin's Seaside Street showing a strong Indo-European mix. Photo by K.T. Ravindran.

Bungalow on Synagogue Street, Jew Town, Cochin. Photo by K.T. Ravindran.

